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*Special Section:
Lessons from OkiJALT*



“Welcome to Nago” Website: A Sophomore English Writing Project

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The impetus behind this semester-long English writing project comes from my desire to have students think of themselves not as merely “students” of the English language, but real “users” of that language. Much has been written about Japanese students’ struggle to communicate effectively in English, regardless of their English test scores, and thus I’m interested in improving basic communication abilities and confidence. The question is, though, how can this be best accomplished in a writing class?

My solution is inspired in part by the concept of the “ideal L2 self,” which links a student’s sense of personal identity to their L2 abilities (Takahashi, 2013). I want to provide opportunities for students to be able to “imagine themselves as being English users” (Takahashi, 2013) and to be able to present an image of themselves and their identity to the world at large. I decided that this goal could be best accomplished through an online writing project that would have tangible benefits for the students and their community.

The course is two sections of a first-semester sophomore writing course at a small university in Nago, which is a medium-sized town in the northern region of Okinawa. I created a semester-long writing project in which students from both classes, working in small groups, will build a single website describing their favorite places to go in Nago and the surrounding areas. Though there is a good deal of information about Okinawa in English on the web, much of it is from the perspective of those with connections to the US military, such as the quite large blog www.okinawahai.com. Other online English-language information on northern Okinawa, which is much more sparsely populated than the southern half of the island, can be

obtained through a rather hit-or-miss survey of travel websites like TripAdvisor. All these factors work together to create a situation in which the vision of Okinawa presented in English to the non-Japanese-speaking world is not a local perspective. Given the rather fraught state of Okinawa’s current political situation—which necessarily includes an international element—I wanted to change that, while at the same time helping my students develop their English composition skills.

One of the main ways that college-age students use their own language is through online activities, whether general web browsing or social networking applications. It makes sense, then, to transition this tendency toward foreign language learning. As Black (2009) points out, integrating online work with language instruction, particularly in a group setting, “provides options for [students] to use language and other modes of representation for authentic communication with peers, teachers, and other experts that they may encounter in their research and explorations... thus extending learning outside of the classroom walls.” Before publishing their writing, then, my students were asked to leave the comfort and safety of the classroom and to venture out into the community. They were asked, in fact required, to make key decisions without the guidance of their teacher and turn those decisions into a publishable writing project.

Plan

First, I created a very basic website using Google’s blogger.com platform. This platform is quite easy to use and can be accessed using a simple Google account login (I created a Meio Writing account for this project). All the students were given access to the account. My own access allowed me to proofread and edit their work before it “went live,” ensuring that web illiteracy (which a surprising number of the students have)

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would not damage any good writing that was done.

The project itself was divided into eight “meetings” throughout the semester:

Class 1: Introduction to the project

Class 2: Groups formed; planning session

Class 4: Individual roles assigned; visit(s) planned; examination of www.Okinawahai.com

Class 7: Work on entry outline

Class 9: Rough draft of entry due; peer review; explanation of how to use blog platform

Class 14: Revised rough draft of entry due; peer review

Class 15: Class proofreading of website (upload entry and pics to site by this class)

Class 16: Presentation of website

In between classes 4 and 7, the students visited their chosen location. Groups visited local tourist attractions, favorite restaurants, sweets shops, and more. I suggested to them that they try to imagine what a foreign exchange student would want to know about Nago before moving here for a year.

After the groups visited their chosen sites, the website meetings became very lively, productive sessions, as they selected pictures, decided the best way to organize their text, and worked with me to find vivid language and exciting hooks (which they had practiced in a description essay midway through the semester). One of the most difficult parts of the project for most of the groups turned out to be writing driving directions to their sites. Because streets in Japan do not generally have names, the students were forced to use very precise language that accurately described the geography of the city (for example, “turn right at the stop light in front of the large resort”). They also had to imagine navigating the streets without the benefit of being able to read Kanji. Thus, they had to stretch their language abilities because they were using that language in a very precise communicative situation. Imagining a foreign visitor to Okinawa lost on the mountains of Motobu was a much more compelling motivation for

precision and correctness than any test or essay prompt I could have devised.

My own workload on the project was minimal until the end of the semester. Then, I met each group individually during class time for proofreading. I also ended up having to do quite a bit of editing on the blog itself, as most of the students didn’t really consider design and readability when they set up their entry on the blog. Unfortunately, this is not something I foresee being able to change, as I don’t want to take away class time in a writing class to provide instruction on using the blog platform beyond the most basic steps.

At the end of the semester I distributed a survey to the students about their assessment of the project. Only about half of the students in one section of the class were able to take it, as a typhoon cancelled the last day of class. However, the overall satisfaction rate was high:

58% of students were “very satisfied” and 39.5% were “somewhat satisfied” with the project.

25.6% of students “strongly agreed” and 55% “somewhat agreed” that the project helped them develop confidence in their English writing abilities.

Nearly 70% found the project more helpful than the textbook, though they were much more divided on whether it was more helpful than the regular course essays (28% said “more helpful,” 42% said “less helpful” and 30% said “both were helpful”)

Below is a small selection of comments the students made about the project. They have not been edited for grammar. (Most comments were in Japanese and these have not yet been translated, so this is a limited selection of the English comments.)

I wrote my sentences carefully than usual because once we publish, many people in the world have chance to see them. Also this was a great chance for us to contribute each other as we work together....If we can advertise this website more, that would be better.

Essay[s for class] and this is different. 'How to get there': This is not write in

essay. I could learn how to write something except essay.

In this time, we didn't see the example.

Next time, to show the example more.

I didn't think I can do this project first time.

Because I had never written long story in English. However, I tried to write English. Of course it was difficult though I liked spending time to make this website! I want everyone to know this website and come to Nago! It think this project is good way to improve my English skill and know about Nago!!

I can make friends thanks to this project.

And I was glad that I visited the place I have never been to by this project.

You should identify the purpose of this project more so your students will do your best more.

The biggest problem I ran into during the semester was that only a few groups managed to meet all the draft deadlines I'd set for them. Several groups arrived at their proofreading appointment with a number of differently sized pieces of paper covered in handwriting instead of the typed draft I'd asked for. During the next iteration of the project, I plan to make rough draft deadlines a part of the project grade.

I have a few future plans for the project. First, each spring, my sophomore writing classes will add to the site, forcing students to travel further and further out of their comfort zones to find new places to visit in Nago. Second, eventually I would like to shift the site from a blog platform to a real website. There, entries could be arranged by topic instead of by date. I'd also like to make the site searchable. Third, if the site proves

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successful, I'd like to present it formally to the Meio community and the city of Nago as a way of enhancing the ties between our university and the local community.

The course in which this project was embedded is a general essay writing course. The following English writing course in our curriculum focuses exclusively on academic writing. Most of my students in the more academic writing course had participated in the website project. I noticed that they were very comfortable thinking of their writing as something they had control over and which could/should be revised again and again before it was finished. They saw me as a guide, not as a towering authority. As the project continues to evolve each spring, my hope is simply that, by providing students a chance to formally publish their English work in a way that tangibly benefits their school and community, students will begin to imagine themselves as users of English, not simply passers of tests.

The site can be found at

<http://welcome-to-nago.blogspot.jp/>

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